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ABSTRACT

Discussing the evolving conception of literacy, this digest provides a current review of material in the ERIC database on the multiplicities of literacies. The digest includes sections on the broadening scope of literacy, acquisition of literacies, defining literacy, and expanding the domain of literacy. (RS)

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Multiplicities of Literacies in the 1990s

by Roger Sensenbaugh

A number of phrases incorporating the word *literacy* have been used in the documents entered into the ERIC database in the past few years. These phrases include *computer literacy, scientific literacy, literacy acquisition, emerging* or *emergent literacy, visual literacy, cultural literacy,* and *literacy instruction.* Closely allied to these "literacies" are terms referring to computer uses in education, second language acquisition, influence of the home environment on students, the whole language approach, and literacy in business and industry.

The Broadening Scope of Literacy

Out of this proliferation of literacies, one important aspect for reading, English, and language arts teachers concerns teaching methods which incorporate the broadening scope of literacy. A common theme in these documents is that literacy is more than just being able to read and write; it is the ability to comprehend, interpret, analyze, respond, and interact with the growing variety of complex sources of information. Calfee (1986) discusses the concept of literacy and how programs should be designed to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds acquire literacy. He includes a description of current curricula and presents tentative recommendations for policy changes at all levels. On a more practical level, McCracken and McCracken (1986) discuss stories, songs, and poetry as part of the repertoire of instructional techniques for developing literacy.

Some documents report on the implementation of a comprehensive program of *literacy education* (Snow, Palladino, and Engel, 1987) while others provide the programs themselves (Graves, 1982). Milz (1987), for example, discusses how teachers can implement the deeper understanding of literacy development that research has offered.

Acquisition of Literacies

Literacy acquisition, that is, the ways in which learners acquire literacy, is important for its instructional implications and for its impact on the way that literacy itself is defined. Observing how children make sense out of the world has taught researchers that there is more to literacy than mastering isolated reading and writing skills. Goodman (1985) argues that children growing up in literate societies begin to read and write long before they start school. The interaction between a parent and child acquiring literacy together is highlighted in studies of intergenerational literacy. Hatch and Freeman (1987) discuss a striking dichotomy between current theory and educational practice in the Ohio public schools. Not only does current theory have a hard time breaking into the arena of current practice, but current theorists are not of one mind when it comes to exactly what research tells us.

Defining Literacy

As the scope of literacy expands, confusion increases as to what exactly is meant by literacy. Venezky (1990), while focusing on adult literacy, concludes with a discussion of the issues surrounding a definition of literacy and presents a definition of his own. Definitions of literacy also need to take into account the variety of cultures. Hamilton-Wieler (1989) argues that different cultural agendas for literacy, emerging from very different cultural histories, will require different solutions.

Graff (1987) provides a much needed historical perspective on the concept of literacy. He argues that not only is the issue of literacy complex, it has continuities and contradictions at its very core. Powell (1990), after discussing the faddishness of writing and talking about literacy, argues that the crucial issue is one of permanency: What does an individual have to do to be forever literate?

As modern culture evolves, so also do the many forms of language within which ways of thinking, working, negotiating, and reading with experience are encoded. To be alert to how language works for creating and organizing meaning is to be conscious of how to manipulate and use it. New technology, for example, demands a greater degree of conscious reflection on its ways of working. (Christie, 1990)

Expanding the Domain

Clearly, *literacy* has broadened beyond skills used in reading and writing to include terms in other disciplines. Butzow and Butzow (1988) describe an

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approach to teaching *scientific literacy* by integrating the subject matter from a variety of disciplines using children's literature. Mitman, *et al.* (1985) focus specifically on the topic of scientific literacy and provide teachers with background on the goals of science instruction and practical recommendations for instructional practice.

The term *media literacy* is most often used to refer to TV watching habits. Abelman (1987) investigates the effect of an in-school curriculum designed to encourage children's awareness of and attention to television's prosocial portrayals. Aiex (1989) summarizes research on mass media and offers suggestions for developing media literacy in students.

Cultural literacy has entered the database as a consequence of Hirsch's work. *Computer literacy* is included but appears under the more general term: *computer uses in education.* Home literacy may become a new term due to the growing number of citations that reflect on parental involvement in literacy acquisition, or literacy in the home.

The definition of literacy has expanded well beyond that found in the scope note of the 1988 *ERIC Thesaurus:* "literacy is the ability to read and write and to communicate with written or printed symbols." Literacy involves making meaning from a variety of sources and communicating it to a variety of audiences.

Graff's position on literacy may be the most constructive for the future: "What is needed is a broader view of reading and writing that integrates and emphasizes the many human abilities in a context of a changing world that requires their development and use. Paths to learning individual literacy by the young must be made less rigid; more attention must be paid to different sequences and structure of learning; and more sensitivity must be shown toward cultural and class influences."

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